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ABSTRACT

Small rural schools have always had an important place in the educational life of New Zealand, but they have faced a number of challenges in the past decade. These challenges include difficulty in attracting and retaining high quality teachers, changing expectations of parents, decreasing rural population, and the impact of national educational reforms. A feasibility study sought to find a different approach to school governance and management in six schools on the east coast of New Zealand. The schools were over 70 years old; each had 6-43 students at the end of 2000 and employed 1-2 teachers. The schools had been "self-managing" since 1989, when governance responsibilities devolved from a regional board to local boards of trustees. The results of self-management have been mixed for these and other small schools, which have difficulty finding capable trustees and providing ongoing training in the face of trustee turnover. The schools in this study had also had significant turnover in their principals in the previous 5 years, with detrimental effects on educational quality. As a result, the state Ministry of Education had appointed a Schools Executive Administrator to assist the school "cluster" with governance and management issues. Community meetings were held in the six communities to assess the feasibility of having one board of trustees and a shared principal for the six schools. Perceived advantages and disadvantages of the scheme are outlined. An appendix presents New Zealand's National Administration Guidelines. (SV)

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Small schools face the challenge - A case study of a group of small rural schools in New Zealand

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Abstract

Small rural schools have always had an important place in the educational life of New Zealand. For some years they have face a number of new challenges. These challenges include the impact of education reforms commenced in 1989; the depopulation of rural areas; difficulty in attracting and retaining high quality teachers and the changing expectations of parents. This case study seeks to provide a brief picture of a group of small schools in one isolated area of New Zealand and to examine the way that they have sought to meet the challenges. Key issues addressed in this paper include the approach to governance and management in these small schools and the effect of falling rolls. The way that teacher shortages have impacted on schools and the way that parents in small rural communities have responded to increased involvement in the education of their children are also discussed.

Introduction

Just as small rural schools have always had an important place in the educational life of Australian communities, the same applies in New Zealand. Yet staffing New Zealand rural schools has always been a challenge. Whereas policies of the past meant that many New Zealand teachers spent at least part of their teaching lives in these small schools, for some years now, a number of new challenges have emerged. They include difficulty in attracting and retaining high quality teachers and the changing expectations of parents, the impact on schools of depopulation of rural areas and the impact of education reforms commenced in 1989.

This case study seeks to provide a brief picture of a group of small schools in one isolated area of New Zealand and to examine the way that they have sought to meet the challenges of governance and management and of teaching and learning. This paper includes a description of a feasibility study, which sought to find a different approach to governance and management in these small schools. The study was prompted by concerns about the quality of schooling, the frequent turnover of principals and teachers and the difficulty of maintaining an effective board of trustees

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in each school. It led to the notion of having one principal and one board of trustees for a group of small schools rather than one board for every school.

Background

With a scattered rural population, New Zealand has always had a large number of small rural schools. Many of these are one to five or six teacher schools with up to about 150 students. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was estimated that about 65% of the total number of schools in New Zealand were one or two teacher schools. As rural areas have depopulated because of a change in farming patterns, a large number of these small schools have closed. Consequently, the percentage of one or two teacher schools has decreased. Of the 2 044 Full Primary and Contributing schools open in New Zealand at the end of 1999, 902 were schools with less than six teachers, (44%). Of these, 424 were one or two teacher schools constituting 21% of all primary and secondary schools, a significant proportion. The trend of small schools closing or amalgamating has continued, especially since the introduction of education reforms in 1989 and is likely to do so even further, as school communities examine how they can best provide quality education for their children.

There were six schools involved in this feasibility study are located on the East Coast of New Zealand. They are one or two teacher schools with rolls ranging from seven students to 43 students. Four of the schools have a staffing entitlement of one teacher equivalent; the remaining two have entitlement to two teachers. All schools have long histories, at least by New Zealand standards. They were established as follows:

School A was established in 1918 with a roll of 16 students. In 1986 it had 27 students and at the end of 2000 had seven students.

School B was established in 1929 with a roll of 11 students. In 1986 it had 23 students and seven students at the end of 2000.

School C was established in 1925 with a roll of nine students and 31 students in 1986. At the end of 2000, seven students were enrolled.

School D was established in 1919 with a roll of 15 students. It had 24 students in 1986 and 27 students at the end of 2000.

School E was established in 1929 with a roll of 36. In 1986 there were 53 students enrolled and in 2000, 43 students were enrolled.

School F was established in 1928 with 9 students. It had 10 students enrolled in 1986 and at the end of 2000 6 students were enrolled (Mathews, 1986).

The fact that they all have such long histories means they are all likely to be or have been integral parts of their communities. It is significant that the schools were all established within a few years. Most began with the growth of farming although one school was directly influenced by the development of a number of small, hydro-electric power schemes. When these schools were established after the First World Wãr, farming became both more intensive as small blocks for returned servicemen were established and extensive and as large tracts of land were broken in for pastoral agriculture. The current rolls of these small schools vary little from when they were established. When the schools were established, a small roll was not considered an issue because of the inaccessibility of the schools. Now the small roll numbers are a continuing source of concern for education authorities and local community members over educational and economic viability.

The issues

There are three issues central to the way these small schools operate. They are the difficulty in providing strong governance; the difficulty in attracting and retaining effective principals and teachers; and the need to ensure that learning quality is of a high standard. They form the basis of the concerns that have been expressed by and to education authorities and to local community members. These need to be explained before detailing the direction of the feasibility study.

Governance

Prior to 1989 governance of all schools was through a regional education board. In the case of the schools in this case study, the education board was located in a larger town almost 150 kilometres away. Each school had an elected school committee of between five and nine members depending on the size of the school. School committees had limited powers but were the main source of local involvement. They spent allocated government monies and carried out minor maintenance. They had little direct control over long term planning and almost no involvement with the appointment of principals and teachers and curriculum.

In 1989 all New Zealand schools became 'self-managing'. This was a result of a worldwide trend to devolution of school governance responsibility. New Zealand moved more quickly and, at the time, more expansively than most other countries that devolved educational administration. The move to 'self-management' was intended to provide greater local involvement in governance and management. Each New Zealand school is now governed by a board of trustees that has legal responsibilities to the government, mainly through the Ministry of Education and Education Review Office. Boards of Trustees are responsible for a wide range of tasks, which are detailed as the National Education Goals. The particular responsibilities of Boards of Trustees are encapsulated in the National Administration Guidelines (Appendix 1) and require schools to take a much more significant part in education in their local communities compared with the old school committees. Governance of schools is the responsibility of each school's board, while the management of each school is the responsibility of the principal. Schools in small communities, like those of this case study, have had considerable difficulty in finding people who are able to provide strong and continuing governance and management for each school.

The need for greater input by school communities has led to a range of responses. For a significant number of small schools, the result of 'self-management' has been mixed. While the opportunity for greater involvement does bring some advantages, the schools in this study have not found it easy to find people who are willing and able to give the commitment of continuing time and energy to their local school. The school communities are often so small that it requires almost each and every family to be represented on a school board of five members and frequent changes of personnel are common. While the government has relaxed the requirement for boards to consist of at least five members, it has been difficult for some schools to find even the minimum of three members. Some New Zealand schools have gained much from self-management but it has tended to be in the larger and more affluent schools where the opportunity for greater local involvement has brought great impetus to the life and work of these schools. It generally has not been in schools located in lower socioeconomic and rural areas as in the schools in this study.

> *Low-decile and high-Maori-enrolment schools are more likely to have gained least from the reforms, and may have even gone backwards, suffering falling rolls at a time when primary rolls were generally rising*

(although not in all regions), carrying additional administrative costs and - although in receipt of additional funding from government-drawing on fewer voluntary resources, and continuing to have power parental involvement (Wylie, 1999).

A second difficulty of governance is the continuing need for training of school trustees. A high turnover of trustees is a feature of governance in these small schools and the need for training of trustees is constant. A clear message from trustees is that they want to be equipped to do the job well and that they need training to do that. With a frequent turnover of trustees the need for that continuing training is obvious. It is a difficult task, and the small communities of this case study have found it very challenging to provide and maintain an effective board of trustees. The trustees need training in matters of education law, employment issues, property and matters that relate to management and curriculum. Simply getting enough people to form and maintain a board is difficult enough without the added need to be constantly teaching new skills and knowledge to new members.

Retention of teachers

A major teacher shortage in many New Zealand rural areas in 1995 and 1996 had particular impact on the rural schools in the case study. At that time most rural schools found it difficult to attract and retain teachers who would provide quality education. Some of this effect has been a historical one since the removal of the country service bar, a scheme which required teachers to serve three years in specified schools before they could achieve salary increases or promotion to positions of responsibility. It was abolished in the late 1970s, and coupled with the change to self-management has probably contributed to the difficulty in attracting and retaining teachers to rural positions. Teachers may not see the opportunity for promotion to be as rewarding as it could be in urban areas. Combined with that is a perception that pressures of being a rural teacher and principal are now much greater than they used to be. This is because of increased an increased administrative workload and concerns that the expectations of school communities are now more apparent than prior to the move to self-management in 1989. The turnover of principals has been a significant factor. In the last five years all schools in the study have had some changes. Schools A and B have both had four principal appointments including one as an Emergency

Staffing Support (ESS); Schools C, D, E and F have had three principal appointments. Two other schools not included in the study but located nearby have had three and six principal appointments, respectively.

Quality of learning

One effect of the difficulty in attracting and retaining principals and teachers in small rural schools has been questions about the quality of education, by the Education Review Office, the New Zealand school audit agency. All New Zealand schools are subject to review every three years. Each school is reviewed against the New Zealand Education Guidelines for curriculum and management matters. When the Review Office deems that a school does not meet requirements they are able to then make a Discretionary Review which gives a short period of time, usually three or six months, for the school to meet requirements. Three of the six schools in the case study have been subject to Discretionary Reviews in recent years. The areas of concerns for the Education Review Office have been with teaching and learning matters, governance and the turnover of principals. As was stated earlier all schools in the study have suffered from a high turnover of principals. Unfortunately, one of the main effects has been on the quality of learning for students. The Education Review Office commented on one school in the following way:

> *Students at X School do not receive a balanced curriculum. The provision of high quality learning opportunities for students is dependent on improving the performance of the teaching principal. Until this happens the quality of education remains at risk. The principal is in the early stages of a teaching career and has prioritised classroom management as being the focus area for development. However, the principal's knowledge of national curriculum requirements is limited and the principal has not yet developed the skills necessary for effective multi-level classroom teaching. Programmes of work do not meet the requirements of National Administration Guideline 1. As a consequence, students are not receiving the quality of education to which they are entitled.*

This is indicative of the situation in some of the schools, and serves to emphasise the effects of staffing difficulties.

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The study

With this background to the situation in the small schools of the study, the University of Waikato was contracted to investigate the feasibility of implementing the notion of a 'roving principal'. The aims of the study were:

- *to obtain an initial consensus among the schools on a preferred option/options for shared governance/management arrangement;*
- *to develop model/models that are likely to be accessible to the schools and the Ministry of Education for shared governance/ management arrangements for the schools; and*
- *to achieve agreement between the schools and the Ministry of Education for a model of shared governance/management.*

A study team of five people undertook the study. Four were University staff members and the fifth was a local community member who had been a teacher in two of the local schools. Her contribution was as a team member and as a local link. The study was conducted over a period of eight weeks and required us to consult with a range of people and organisations. The timeframe was limited and placed some constraints but it did ensure there was a strong focus.

Prior to this study being undertaken the Ministry of Education had taken some action on the situation. The first of these actions was the appointment of a Schools Executive Administrator (SEA) to serve the six schools in what was termed as the 'cluster'. This appointment was for three years and was commenced in 1998. The SEA was to assist the schools in their administration looking particularly to focus on eliminating duplication of tasks. Then the Ministry asked an independent consultant to review the success of this appointment. This was done in early 2000. One of the recommendations of this report was that a feasibility study should be conducted to examine the possibility of shared governance / management functions between schools.

The study team initially consulted each school community. This was done through a visit to each school and then with a local community meeting. At these meetings, community members were asked the following questions:

1. What things about the current scene with the administrator in place do you thin k are working well.
2. What are the curriculum strengths in your school?
3. What gives your school its particular identity?
4. If you had a crystal ball what would you want to change about the way your school works now?
5. If you had a crystal ball what aspects of children's learning would you like to be focussed on over a five-year period?
6. Looking ahead at the learning needs of your children, what changes in the organisation and operation of the cluster would best help your children?
7. What do you think technology would do for the working of your school?
8. What are some possibilities for changes in the way that principal's work and the way that the Boards work?
9. With the final question some possible ideas were floated to initiate discussion. These were:
    - A clustered board of trustees with a representative from each community. This Board of Trustees would deal with a site committee based group in each school sharing the local needs with the site-based board.
    - A clustered Board of Trustees appointed on the basis of particular expertise that would deal with a site-based group in each school sharing the local needs with the site-based board.
    - A 'shared' principal.
    - The status quo with the Schools Executive Administrator.
    - The status quo before the Schools Executive Administrator.

The community meetings were all well attended which highlighted the amount of interest generated by the proposals. In some cases the meetings were representative of the whole community - members with no children at school yet to those whose children were well through compulsory schooling. As might be expected, responses varied a great deal. In questions 1 - 7 community members were very focussed on their own schools and clearly indicated not only their interest in the school, but also a clear desire to keep their own local school. They made comments that suggested they valued their schools as community centres, as places with excellent resources and institutions that had strong histories and which enjoyed excellent support from local communities. They were strong in their view that schooling through correspondence was not an option for their children and they could see that the use of Information

Communication Technology would be an advantage. The community members had no real view on how this might happen, although that was not surprising to the study team, as it is hard to envisage something for which one has no background.

Question 8 generated much discussion and very quickly became the central issue, which was significant in reaching the goal of the study. The study team collated the responses for each aspect of the ideas and reported on the advantages and disadvantages. When considering the advantages of school, which would function with a Board of Trustees comprising a representative form each community, responses focussed on logistics, management of the workload, collaboration and accountability. The community members suggested they could see this option possibly reducing isolation; help share the governance load; could deal with finance, property, health and safety, review and legislative issues; could provide efficiency and economy of scale; and could provide a greater pool of skilled people. They also considered there could be opportunities for collaboration through schools sharing common problems, up-to-date information and communication in general. They suggested that this option could lead to less local conflict and might assist in providing greater accountability.

When responding to the disadvantages of working with one Board of Trustees, community members saw a loss of identity as a major factor. Representative of their comments were statements such as

- *We would be looking after six schools rather than our own.*
- *We don't want to get bogged down with other schools problems.*
- *Each community is different.*
- *It could lead to a loss of local control and identity.*
- *There is a possibility of domination by people or communities. (Couch, Harold, McCarthy, Martin & Yates, 2000, p. 3)*

Community members also saw difficulty with such an idea because of travel distance, financial considerations and equality of representation.

The same arguments for and against were apparent when community members responded to the idea of retaining their existing governance arrangement or moving to

a board of Trustees which would be appointed on the basis of expertise rather than an elected board.

The issue of having a principal who would serve all six schools became the major issue. In the process of discussion community members became reassured that the feasibility study was not about closing their schools. The focus did become clearer and they did appear to accept the concept of a shared principal. It was interesting that the term 'roving principal' was quickly rejected. Community members, principals and teachers did not think that such a term fitted what they were looking at and were more comfortable with 'shared principal' as a term.

The discussion of a shared principal focussed on advantages and disadvantages of having a "shared principal". The advantages included the way such an approach would help provide assistance for less experienced principals and teachers; assist in the provision of professional development; lighten principals' workloads; assist with day to day management; help coordinate planning; provide a greater focus on educational outcomes; assist with a greater emphasis on technology; "free" the principal to give more teaching time.

The disadvantages were raised and represented the way each community felt about their school and its identity. The issues included the consideration that an educational leader would not take a great deal of responsibility off the site manager, the possibility of one school requiring more time than their share and the thought that it could be difficult for a "shared principal" to have a close knowledge of each community. In addition, the view was expressed that such a possibility could be a threat to the career paths of current principals especially if they were performing well.

The study required extensive consultation with each community and parties who were likely to be affected by such a possibility. Among the groups consulted were the Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Educational Institute. The Ministry were consulted to clarify legal issues and NZEI for industrial issues.

Following consultation the study team presented a report to community members, principals and teachers that indicated that the notion of having an executive principal

and one board to serve six schools was possible. It would achieve the required outcome of investigating shared governance / management. The schools have accepted the idea and further discussion has continued throughout the first part of 2001.

Conclusions

Small schools such as those in the study outlined face and will continue to face difficulties of governance and management. The study found that such an idea is legally, financially and professionally possible. Whether it actually happens depends on a number of factors. First of these is that the communities involved will need to resolve the extent to which they wish to retain their direct involvement in their schools. If they are prepared to share the load of governance, there are likely benefits in a balancing of workload and in the retention of expertise in boards of trustees. With a possible board of trustees being 12 members as opposed to 30 for separate boards there is the potential for greater stability in the board. It would not place the same pressure on each school community to provide separate boards but such a framework would allow for local involvement such as previously existed under the earlier school committee arrangement.

The second factor is that the principals and teachers will need to be convinced of the merits of such a proposal. They will need to be assured that having one principal in an executive role would not be detrimental to the operation of each school. While transitional arrangements would need to be made for current principals as a safeguard, it does seem likely that the creation of a 'shared' principalship would offer benefits. These include the creation of a promotion step that should attract applicants of high quality and experience who would be able to take a strong professional leadership role. Appropriately remunerated such a person would be likely to have the breadth and depth of curriculum and administration to offer a coordinated approach to a group of at least four schools. It could provide the opportunity for a 'shared' principal to ensure that much of the strategic planning for the schools is done in a coordinated way. It would also help in allowing teachers in each of the small schools to concentrate on classroom teaching and free them from much of the wider administration that appears to have enveloped many rural teachers.

The opportunity for a shared principal to operate in this way is likely to provide for professional development for both the 'shared' principal and the teachers in each of the school. One of the difficulties faced by all rural schools is continuing professional development in an accessible form. The opportunity to use online approaches is being investigated but the day to day supplementing of this would assist all teachers in these rural schools. This, in turn, would be likely to lead to an improvement in the learning climate for students in these small rural schools.

The feasibility study completed by the University of Waikato has looked at the possibility of shared governance / management in this group of six small rural schools. There are no legal impediments but the industrial; community and professional view may have a significant bearing on whether the approach is implemented in the near future.

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Appendix A **The National Administration Guidelines**
(As amended by notice published in the New Zealand Gazette, 25/11/99)

NAG 1 (revised)
Each Board of Trustees is required to foster student achievement by providing teaching and learning programmes which incorporate the New Zealand Curriculum (essential learning areas, essential skills and attitudes and values) as expressed in National Curriculum Statements.
Each Board, through the principal and staff is required to:
i. develop and implement teaching and learning programmes:
a. to provide all students in years 1-10 with opportunities to achieve for success in all the essential learning and skill areas of the New Zealand curriculum;
b. giving priority to student achievement in literacy and numeracy, especially in years 1-4;
ii. through a range of assessment practices, gather information that is sufficiently comprehensive to enable the progress and achievement of students to be evaluated; giving priority first to:
a. student achievement in literacy and numeracy, especially in years 1-4; and then to:
b. breadth and depth of learning related to the needs, abilities and interests of students, the nature of the school's curriculum, and the scope of the New Zealand curriculum (as expressed in the National Curriculum Statements);
iii. on the basis of good quality assessment information, identify students and groups of students;
a. who are not achieving;
b. who are at risk of not achieving;
c. who have special needs; and
d. aspects of the curriculum which require particular attention;
iv. develop and implement teaching and learning strategies to address the needs of students and aspects of the curriculum identified in **iii** above;
v. in consultation with the school's Maori community, develop and make known to the school's community policies, plans and targets for improving the achievement of Maori students;
vi. provide appropriate career education and guidance for all students in year 7 and above, with a particular emphasis on specific career guidance for those students who have been identified by the school as being at risk of leaving school unprepared for the transition to the workplace or further education/training.

NAG 2 (revised from previous NAG4)
Each Board of Trustees with the principal and teaching staff is required to:
i. develop a strategic plan which documents how they are giving effect to the National Education Guidelines through their policies, plans and programmes, including those for curriculum, assessment and staff professional development;
ii. maintain an on-going programme of self-review in relation to the above policies, plans and programmes, including evaluation of information on student achievement;
iii. report to students and their parents on the achievement of individual students, and to the school's community on the achievement of students as a whole and of groups (identified through **1 iii** above) including the achievement of Maori students against the plans and targets referred to in **1 v** above.

NAG 3 (previously NAG2)
According to the legislation on employment and personnel matters, each Board of Trustees is required in particular to:
i. develop and implement personnel and industrial policies, within policy and procedural frameworks set by the Government from time to time, which promote high levels of staff performance, use educational resources effectively and recognise the needs of students;
ii. be a good employer as defined in the State Sector Act 1988 and comply with the conditions contained in employment contracts applying to teaching and non-teaching staff.

NAG 4 (previously NAG 3)
According to legislation on financial and property matters, each Board of Trustees is also required in particular to:
i. allocate funds to reflect the school's priorities as stated in the charter;
ii. monitor and control school expenditure, and ensure that annual accounts are prepared and audited as required by the Public Finance Act 1989 and the Education Act 1989;
iii. comply with the negotiated conditions of any current asset management agreement, and implement a maintenance programme to ensure that the school's buildings and facilities provide a safe, healthy learning environment for students.

NAG 5
Each Board of Trustees is also required to:
i. provide a safe physical and emotional environment for students;
ii. comply in full with any legislation currently in force or that may be developed to ensure the safety of students and employees.

NAG 6
Each Board of Trustees is also expected to comply with all general legislation concerning requirements such as attendance, the length of the school day, and the length of the school year.

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